

DENVER, COLORADO



Photograph courtesy of the Convention and Visitors Bureau of Denver.

Like some futuristic aggregate of crystals, Daniel Libeskind's addition to the Denver Art Museum (DAM) explodes into the sky in multiple directions, suggesting technological dominance, joy and optimism. It's a fitting image for a city whose destiny has been hitched to minerals ripped from the earth—gold, lead and shale oil—yet which also revels in the natural beauty of its muscular slopes and clear, cool streams. In spite of a tumbling economy, the near collapse of state arts funding and the bankruptcy of one regional institution, Denver artists and arts advocates are still betting on tomorrow. "Colorado is becoming a bellwether state," says local arts booster Gully Stanford, former managing director of the Denver Center Theater Company. "We have a stereotype—the outdoors—that we are somehow philistine and not cultivated. But in fact the evidence would prove otherwise. There is cultural literacy here."

Such robust confidence would have seemed more appropriate in 1998, the year the first *Reporting the Arts* study was undertaken. Back then, Denver was floating in the tech bubble. Buoyed by jobs in nearby Boulder, the population was rising and blueprints were being drawn for new arts facilities. Citizens ponied up \$62.5 million for the DAM addition and \$75 million to

renovate the decrepit Auditorium Theatre.

Then came September 11 and the recession. Unemployment hit 6.1 percent, prompting the state legislature to cap spending and slash the Colorado Council for the Arts budget from \$1.9 million to \$813,000. At the end of 2003, 9 out of 13 major Denver arts groups reported falling attendance, and the city was still leaking jobs.

Amid all this doom and gloom, in 2003 the area's major public funder, the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, still managed to maintain funding levels at nearly \$35 million, a reduction of only \$2.5 million from 2000. The city also elected a pro-arts mayor, John Hickenlooper, who is fond of paraphrasing *The Rise of the Creative Class*, a popular book that links arts development to a strong economy. Hickenlooper left untouched the \$893,000 budget for the Denver Office of Art, Culture and Film and led a successful drive for a \$6.5 million bond issue to put an arts specialist in every elementary school. Private sources contributed an extra \$60 million for DAM and \$42 million for the spectacular Newman Center for the Performing Arts, which gave the city its first acoustically fine music venue. A land grant materialized for the new Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver, and a museum dedicated to the late

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Gully Stanford
former managing director
Denver Center
Theater Company

Denver modernist Vance Kirkland opened downtown.

But it is in the visual arts that Denver appears especially ready to fulfill its promise. Already known for a feisty alternative scene at Edge Gallery and Pirate: A Contemporary Art Oasis, the city is experiencing a new wave of gallery openings. Denver native Tyler Aiello and his wife, Monica, both artist-designers, are emblematic of the trend. Last year they opened Studio Aiello, a spacious gallery-studio complex, in a warehouse district northeast of downtown. "I think this is one of the more exciting times," says Tyler. "You have a lot of emerging artists who have been moving to Colorado who have shown around the country or abroad."

Rocky Mountain News arts and features editor Mike Pearson notes that the "vibrancy and youth" of the population, as well as its ethnic diversity, make it "harder to figure out what is Denver's identity, beyond sort of a western cow town. It's being influenced by people from all over now."

Indeed, the census reveals a much-changed city with rising youth and Hispanic populations. Excellent shows at the Center for Hispanic Art and Culture reflect Denver's new character, though an ambitious building campaign for the Museo de las Americas collapsed after the dot-com bust. The city's small black population continues to support its first-rate African-American dance company, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance.

Youthfulness has likewise contributed to the creative surge in Denver's theater scene, with spunky little troupes like Buntport and Rattlebrain Theatre popping up all over town. According to *Denver Post* critic John Moore, there were 53 theater groups in the area. Mainstream Denver theater, of course, hit prime time years ago when the Denver Center Theatre Company won a 1998 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theater. As the company celebrates its silver anniversary, it reports that 76 of its 255 productions have been world premieres, including *The Laramie Project*, a regionally resonant drama that probes the hate-crime murder of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming.

Colorado's fabled 300 days of sunshine per year turn Denver into a classical music lover's paradise in the summertime. The Santa Fe Opera, Central City Opera and Aspen Music Festival are all close at hand. During the rest of the year, though, clouds can gather. The Colorado Symphony, which rose from the ashes of the Denver Symphony in 1998, has vastly improved under the inspired leadership of Marin



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Alsop. She recently became music director laureate, and in 2005 she will officially pass the baton to Jeffrey Kahane. The symphony's most recent season was larded with crowd-pleasers. The nearby Colorado Springs Symphony Orchestra went belly-up last year, reincarnated itself as the Colorado Springs Philharmonic and is now hanging on for dear life. "Denver is pretty conservative in its taste in the arts," observes Steve Seifert, executive director at the Newman Center. "*The Phantom of the Opera* has been to Denver at least three times, and it sells out instantly.

Colorado Opera is doing *La Bohème*, *The Barber of Seville* and *La Traviata*. That's intentional. They're going to sell out. It's the McDonald's factor. People know exactly what they're going to get."

In the Newman's gorgeous, acoustically perfect Gates Concert Hall—part of a complex that also includes the Lamont School of Music—Seifert is cautiously offering challenges: a mix of jazz, world music, chamber music and theater. The respected Colorado Ballet cut back its season, presenting four works including George Balanchine's *Rubies*. Meanwhile the company's new partnership with Kroenke Sports Enterprises—which owns Denver's hockey and basketball teams—is cause for celebration, as is its much-anticipated move to the new Lyric Opera theater facility, which it will share with Opera Colorado.

The popular-music artist most identified with Denver is, of course, the late folk singer John Denver. Recently, however, the area has generated several nationally successful jam bands—Big Head Todd, Leftover Salmon and the String Cheese Incident—which blend bluegrass, jazz, rock and world music. And lovers of another great popular art form, film, enjoy the highly respected Denver International Film Festival, which recently picked up a title sponsor, the local cable company Starz.

Finding a title sponsor in 2002 was a coup, particularly given Denver's highly centralized and somewhat problematic public-funding system, which depends almost entirely on the

Scientific and Cultural Facilities District. The fund collects a .1 percent sales tax for arts and culture, and in 2003 distributed a whopping \$34,825,701 to more than 300 organizations throughout the seven metropolitan counties. Though it is the envy of arts advocates everywhere, its dominance creates a uniquely precarious environment. Centralization is a problem at the Denver Performing Arts Complex as well, where all the major companies—the Denver Center Theater Company, Opera Colorado, Colorado Ballet and Denver Center Attractions, which brings in touring shows—are clustered under one roof. On any given weekend, as many as 20,000 patrons flood into DPAC's eight venues, creating nightmare traffic. A new parking structure has alleviated some of the stress, as have suburban venues such as the recently expanded Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities and a new contemporary-arts center in Lakewood.

Denver's tendency to keep everything in one place may reflect its relative youth. For in spite of a popular boast that as a pioneer town it "had more theaters than hospitals," as an arts center it is just beginning to come into its own. With the new Gates Hall up and running and new homes for visual art as well as opera and ballet in the works, Denver clearly is better off now than it was in 1998. The odds seem to suggest that those betting on its future—from majors like the Denver Art Museum to upstarts like the Aiellos and Buntport Theater—probably have their chips on the right number.

BY PAUL DE BARROS

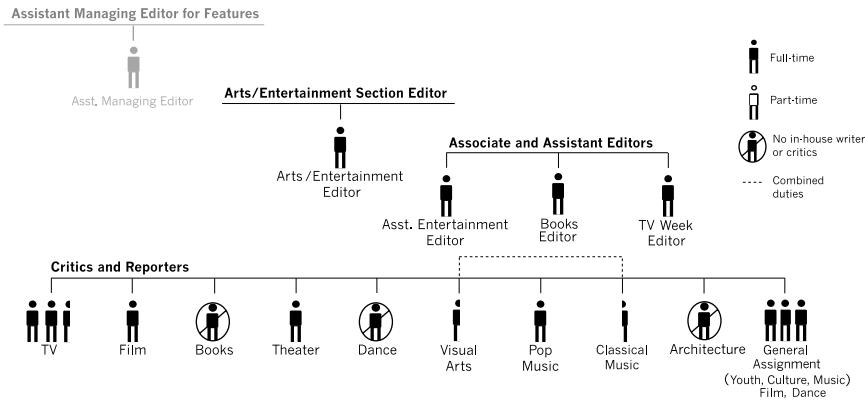
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Steve Seifert
executive director
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THE DENVER POST

1998-2003

In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk and freelancers)



Daily circulation:

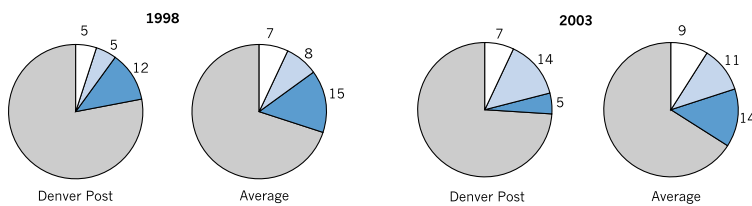
Arts-and-culture newshole:

Number of arts-and-culture articles:

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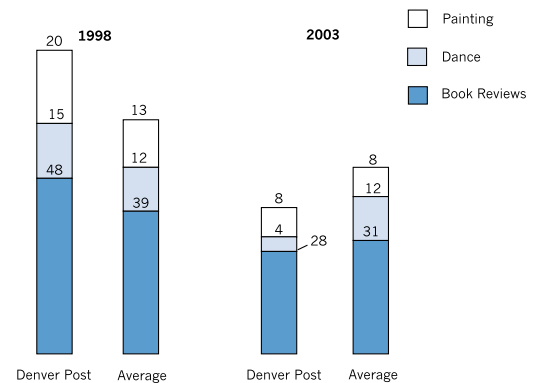
Prominence of Arts and Feature

percentage of overall pagination devoted to daily A&L sections , weekend arts supplements and non-arts feature sections



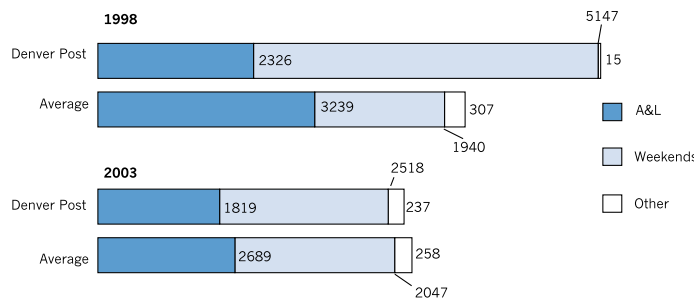
Book Reviews, Dance & Painting

number of book reviews and articles on dance and painting



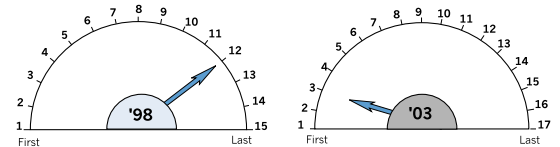
Newshole for Listings

space (in column inches) devoted to arts-and-culture listings



Movie Journalism

ranking among all newspapers studied for percentage of arts-and-culture journalism newshole (listings excluded) devoted to movies



BACK IN OCTOBER 1998 *The Denver Post* rivaled the *Chicago Tribune* in the total number of column inches of articles and listings devoted to arts and culture. Yet by October 2003, the *Tribune's* arts-and-culture newshole was more than 50 percent larger than the *Post's*. The paper has cut back on both its articles and its listings. The journalism was scaled back in *Scene*, its daily arts-and-lifestyles section, and listings were taken out of its weekend supplements, Friday's *Weekend* and Sunday's *Arts & Entertainment*. In October 1998, the *Post* was a leader among metropolitan newspapers as a source of listings. Five years later the volume of the *Post's* listings was below average.

The cuts in A&C coverage appear to be caused by retrenchment throughout the entire newspaper. Since we last looked, the *Post* stopped running a Saturday edition. It also reorganized its daily specialist sections, cutting the proportion of pages devoted to news (the "A" and metro sections) and increasing the prominence of the sports, business and A&L sections. So paradoxically, although *Scene* had its newshole cut, it increased its share of the newspaper's pages. The

same happened on the weekend, where the supplements doubled their share of the *Post's* pages, yet cut their newshole. Astonishingly, no other newspaper in our study assigned more prominence to the weekend arts than the *Post*.

Non-arts feature sections suffered instead, with a smaller share of the pagination of a shrinking newspaper. As a consequence, the decorative-arts beats—such as haute couture and crafts, which are usually covered outside the arts sections—virtually disappeared.

Scene has ceased to be a regular forum for reviews, their volume cut by more than half since October 1998. Overall, reviews for television and fiction books have been hardest hit. Other areas of the arts to suffer steep declines in coverage were dance and painting. The weekend cuts in listings hit movies hardest. In this the *Post* bucked an industry trend: Only two other metropolitan newspapers we monitored increased their ratio of movie articles to listings as the *Post* did. Our study coincided with the annual International Film Festival in Denver, helping to make movie journalism a specialty, occupying almost one-third of its entire A&C newshole.—AT

ARTS COVERAGE IN DENVER: A CRITICAL VIEW

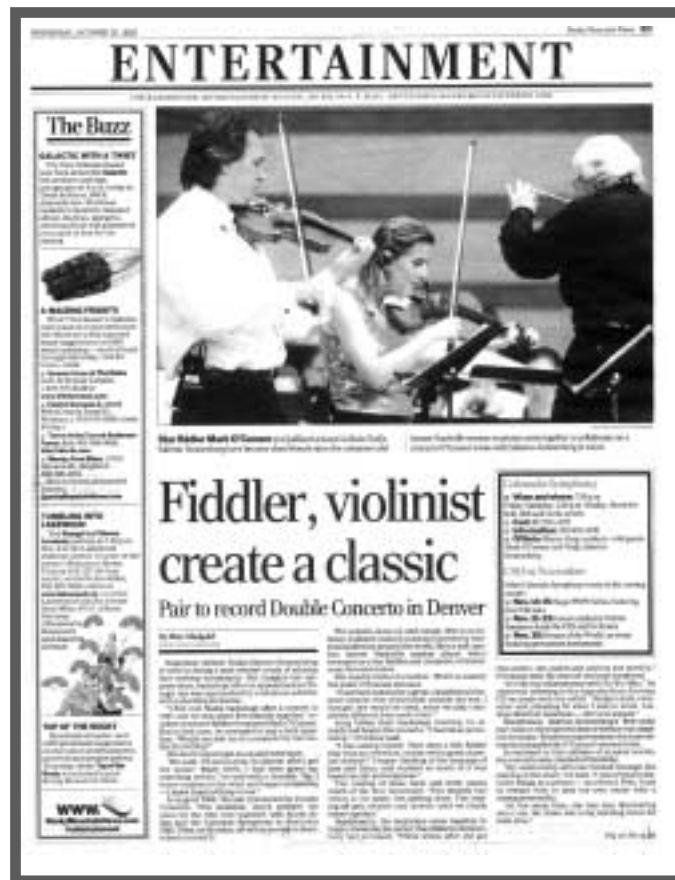
IN JANUARY 2001, when a joint operating agreement ended the century-long newspaper war between *The Denver Post* and the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, hopes soared that peace would bring prosperity—and long-delayed improvements—to arts journalism in the Mile High City. But after September 11 and the dot-com bust, big plans and hopes for new hires were put on hold. The outcome was not so much a disaster as an anticlimax: Denver arts journalism circa 2003 looks and feels pretty much the same as it did in 1998—lively, competitive, community-minded, consumer-friendly, populist and, with some exceptions, attentive to local arts. It is also chronically understaffed and more of a follower than a leader when it comes to arts coverage.

The agreement brought to a close a debilitating decade in which the *Rocky Mountain News* suffered losses of \$123 million—\$20 million in the first six months of 2000 alone. The first such accord between two morning papers, it merged the business operations of two dailies with very distinct personalities.

The E.W. Scripps-owned *Rocky* is a populist tabloid with a noisy cover and a daily arts/features insert called *Spotlight*—except on Saturday, when the whole paper becomes a fat broadsheet, the town's virtual "advance Sunday paper." The *Post*, flagship of the Denver-based MediaNews Group Inc., is a broadsheet with the upscale tone of a civic steward. Not as quick with a punch as the *Rocky*, the *Post* can nevertheless delve more deeply into a story. When the papers bring out combined editions on the weekend, circulation on Sunday, when the *Post* tops the masthead, is a whopping 783,274, compared to 610,024 when the *Rocky* leads on Saturday.

Some trends apply in both newsrooms, including a preference for entertainment over arts, both as section header and subject. Coverage of film, celebrities, bars and restaurants has increased, while arts education and ethnic and community arts receive fitful attention. Formerly ambitious book sections have been reduced to four pages. Neither paper has a critic devoted solely to architecture or dance. Arts stories rarely migrate into other sections, nor do they often get Page 1 play, even as teasers.

At the *Rocky*, arts coverage is heaviest on



DENVER ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

weekends. Friday's *Spotlight* is divided into *Entertainment*, favoring movies, and *Weekend at Home*, with a book section and reviews of videos, CDs and DVDs. Saturday features longer, in-depth articles. The penultimate news page offers *People & Prime Time*, made up of arts and celebrity news and occasional reviews. Looking to snag youthful readers, the paper recently enlisted two high school interns to cover video games and gadgets and dramatically upgraded its Web site. Comprehensive, service-oriented listings at both the *Rocky* and the *Post* are aimed at the same demographic.

The *Rocky* takes a utilitarian approach to reviews, using a grading system. "I tell the critics the same thing over and over again," says Arts and Features Editor Mike Pearson. "Their job is to be consumer reporters."

The paper has virtually the same arts personnel today as in 1998. One reporter is responsible for visual arts, architecture and arts funding, another for classical music and dance. There is only one popular-music critic. "They don't have the manpower," says rock publicist Wendi

"I tell the critics the same thing over and over again. Their job is to be consumer reporters."

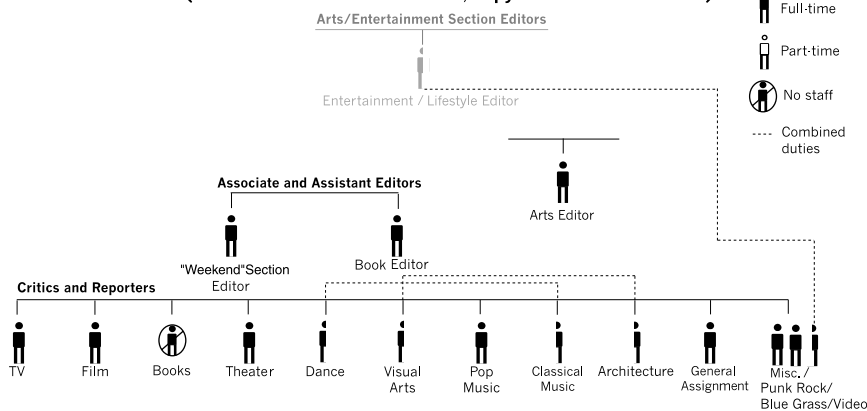
Mike Pearson
arts and features editor
Rocky Mountain News

In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk and freelancers)

Rocky Mountain News

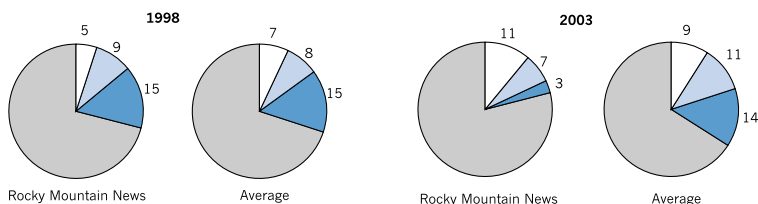
1998-2003

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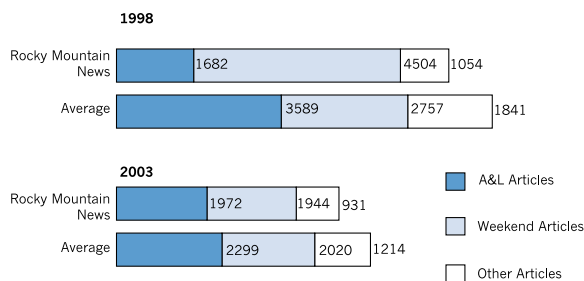
Prominence of Arts and Features Sections

percentage of overall pagination devoted to daily A&L sections , weekend arts supplements and non-arts feature sections



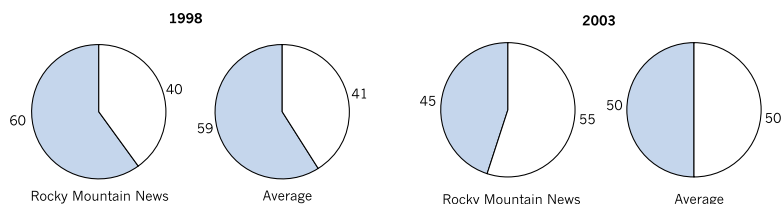
Newshole for Journalism

space (in column inches) devoted to arts-and-culture articles (listings excluded) in daily A&L sections and weekend arts supplements



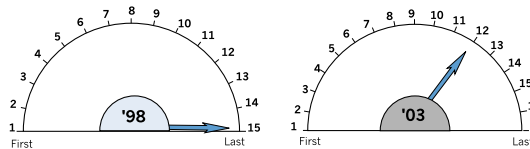
Weekend Newshole

percentage of arts-and-culture newshole in weekend arts supplements assigned to articles and listings



Music Journalism

ranking among all newspapers studied for percentage of arts-and-culture journalism newshole (listings excluded) devoted to music



MOST OF THE CHANGES in arts-and-culture coverage at the Denver *Rocky Mountain News* since 1998 stem from changes in Denver's newspaper wars rather than from a switch in editorial philosophy at the *Rocky*. In 2001 the *Rocky* and the *Denver Post* signed a joint operating agreement stipulating that the *Rocky* discontinue Sunday publication.

As a consequence, the *Rocky's* previously voluminous weekly sections have been cut in half. The paper now runs its Spotlight section six days a week. On five days it functions as a daily arts-and-lifestyles section, and on Friday it is formatted as a weekend supplement. In October 1998 this supplement ran Fridays and Sundays. The weekend cuts were not executed equally across the board, however. The weekend newshole for articles was more than halved, while the space for listings survived relatively intact. Amid all these cuts the arts fared relatively well compared to non-arts feature sections, which were scaled back drastically.

The *Rocky* thus became one of the few newspapers in our study to increase emphasis on the daily A&L section. Its share of total pages went up, its newshole for A&C articles went up from minuscule to average, and its volume of listings went up slightly too. The increase of

the size of the daily Spotlight elevated that section to parity with the daily Business section. However, as is typical for the tabloid format, Sports was much bigger than either. It has almost doubled its share of the *Rocky's* pages since five years ago.

The A&C cutbacks have been orderly across the spectrum. Movies, books and the performing and visual arts were each scaled back by roughly the same proportion. The exceptions were television and music. It is not surprising that the newshole for articles on TV should be cut back less than for other art forms, since the *Rocky's* daily A&L section's schedule was left unscathed. Expressed as a percentage of its overall effort, TV actually increased marginally. The share of the newshole devoted to music articles also increased—from minuscule to average.

The *Rocky's* cutbacks were no greater than should be expected of a schedule reduction from seven to six days. While the monthly story count diminished, and the average article length fell slightly too, in Denver's competitive environment, arts and culture at the crosstown *Post*—which agreed to discontinue Saturday publication—took the much greater hit.—AT

Walker, who rates the *Rocky's* pop music coverage as a 3 out of a possible 10 because the paper rarely covers local music.

Spotlight's layout can be a challenge. Though crisp info boxes and punchy, marginal arts briefs invite a quick scan, pages can be a jumble of jumped story fragments and ads. It would be a disservice, however, to miscast the *Rocky* as low-brow because it is a tab. It regularly presents sophisticated culture stories, and for the past three years has compiled a comprehensive annual review of local arts organizations. "It's not dumbed-down," says visual-arts critic Mary Voelz Chandler. "We fight against that blue-collar image."

If the *Rocky* is blue-collar, the *Post* is blue-stocking. "The grinding problem at the *Post* is getting recognition from younger, hipper readers," confesses rock writer Ricardo Baca. "Something could happen in Denver without the *Post* knowing about it," publicist Carrie Lombardi says of the local music scene, but adds forgivingly, "I think they're overwhelmed." Recently, theater critic John Moore inaugurated a popular year-end local music roundup.

Denver Art Museum Executive Director Lewis Sharp, on the other hand, gives the *Post's* Kyle MacMillan high marks, particularly for a recent article on an iconic American artist. "Every critic who has ever reviewed Frederic Remington has gone back to the same old stereotype review—the romantic image of the West," says Sharp. "That's the safe, easy thing to do. Kyle looked, he responded—it was a very intelligent review."

Like the *Rocky* with Spotlight, the *Post* folds arts into Scene, the Monday-through-Thursday features section, giving arts the lead on Fridays in Weekend Entertainment and Weekend Movies. The *Post's* Sunday Arts and Entertainment offers "think" pieces, longer features and Books & Authors. Last year the paper inaugurated a comprehensive fall arts preview.

The *Post* has been traumatized by staff changes over the past five years, including the death of its fine-arts critic, the retirement of its dance reviewer and the resignation of its rock writer after he was caught plagiarizing. Though two general-assignment arts staffers have been

added, MacMillan still doubles up on visual arts and classical music, racking up 256 bylines in 2003. "We feel like we're shortchanging people in classical music, dance or visual art," says Arts and Entertainment editor Ed Smith, though he adds that staff turnover "has meant fresh ideas."

Denver arts lovers have alternatives. *Westword*, with a free circulation of 100,000, is the best source for local music as well as sassy visual-arts and film criticism. *Urban Spectrum*, a 17-year-old multicultural monthly with an African-American focus and a print run of 25,000, regularly covers the arts. So does the 56-year-old *Denver Business Journal*, which distributes 18,000 copies weekly. Denverites also hear arts features on KCFR's one-hour weekday show *Colorado Matters*. Colorado Public Radio's other station, KVOD, offers classical music and live local broadcasts on *Colorado Spotlight*. No local TV network, however, has a dedicated arts show.

As Denver blossoms into a cosmopolitan center, small-town values such as civic-mindedness and public service pull the papers in one direction, while big-city standards of sophisticated, intellectual leadership tug in the other. According to longtime arts activist Gully Stanford, readers can still get "a pretty good overview" of the city's arts scene from its newspapers, but some complain that Denver papers don't do a very good job of helping readers discuss the arts. In other cities, says Jennifer Doran, co-owner of the important Robischon Gallery, "even people who are merely curious about visual art have a language in place to talk about it. Here, there isn't a language."

Will Denver dailies step up to the plate? "We still see areas where we have some more growing to do," Jeannette Chavez, the *Post's* managing editor for operations, says guardedly. "Arts is one of them."

In the meantime, even if staffing levels don't rise soon, Denver readers still have the rare pleasure of being able to choose. "It's a two-paper town," says Britta Erickson, public relations director for the Denver International Film Festival. "They're constantly looking at what the other one's doing. It keeps it fresh, trying to one-up each other. You'd be surprised at how competitive the arts writers are about their beats."

"We still see areas where we have some more growing to do. Arts is one of them."

Jeannette Chavez
managing editor
for operations
The Denver Post

BY PAUL DE BARROS

THE LOS ANGELES TIMES: A BIG CITY DAILY PUTS ITS MUSCLE BEHIND THE ARTS

WHEN NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF'S dispatches from Baghdad began appearing in the *Los Angeles Times*, they seemed to exemplify everything that had gone right with the newspaper's arts coverage. The *L.A. Times's* chief architecture critic, Ouroussoff had gone to Iraq to examine its ancient and modern buildings, a project no other paper had thought to undertake. It demanded a commitment from the *L.A. Times's* leadership, space in the culture section for long, thoughtful pieces about what might strike some as an esoteric subject, and resources to support one more journalist in a war zone. The series almost gained Ouroussoff a Pulitzer. He was a finalist last year, when the paper won five prizes.

The elements that combined to breathe life into Ouroussoff's series have made the *L.A. Times*, over the last three years, a premier forum for arts and culture, rivaling *The New York Times* quantitatively and, many would say, qualitatively. The big changes started three years ago, in 2001, a year after a new team took over the paper. The merger of the Times Mirror and Tribune Company brought in John S. Carroll, formerly with the *Baltimore Sun*, who became the *L.A. Times's* editor-in-chief; and Dean Baquet, of *The New York Times*, who became managing editor. Both had visions of remaking a paper that had suffered much in the '90s, and reached an ultimate low in 1999 with the notorious Staples Center incident, during which *L.A. Times* advertising executives agreed to split profits from a special section about the new sports center with the center itself.

One of Carroll's high priorities was arts and culture. Toward this end he hired John Montorio away from *The New York Times* as deputy managing editor for features. He further created half-a-dozen new positions—including one for a new film critic, Manohla Dargis—and a few more for investigative Hollywood reporters. But, most visibly, the look of the Calendar section was radically redesigned, the Sunday edition turning from a tabloid into a two-section broadsheet, allowing for more space for longer pieces and prominent art.

During the past three years the reporting on Hollywood has gone from being “press-release-driven and faux-event-driven,” as Montorio described it, to being more enterprising and ambitious. The critics, too, have raised more idiosyncratic voices, especially Dargis, who came to the paper from an alternative weekly. But the *L.A. Times* has also striven to cover more than just Hollywood well. In the past year the completion of Frank Gehry's Disney Hall became a big story. The Los Angeles Philharmonic and its conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen consistently make important classical music news. The art scene, too, was recognized for its international significance. With the exception of theater, for which the *L.A. Times* has spent years searching for a critic, the paper has covered these stories well.

As Brett Israel, the Sunday Calendar section editor, puts it, “We have the resources, we have the space in the paper, we have the right-size staff, we have the budgets for travel and for freelancers, and we have the photographers. So this should, by rights, be one of the few papers in the world that covers culture ambitiously and intelligently and comprehensively.”

Though it certainly seems truer now than at any time in the recent past, there are signs that this golden age may not last. For one thing, recent budget cuts imposed by the Tribune Company have forced the paper to ax 60 editorial positions, including two in the arts and culture department. But there are other ominous signs. Recently both Ouroussoff and Dargis were poached by *The New York Times* to become architecture and film critics, respectively. In the 1990s this type of migration, from west to east, was a sign that the paper was ailing. Now it might be more the curse that follows the blessing of the Pulitzers. “I think it speaks to what we've done here,” says Lisa Fung, arts editor. “I don't think in the past people were looking to the *L.A. Times* for these kinds of great stories.”

BY GAL BECKERMAN